BAPTIZING AND ORDAINING
The Case of Gays and Lesbians

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The Episcopal Church, along with several other main line Christian churches, has been struggling for some years over the admission of practicing homosexuals to the ordained ministries. At the same time, many gay and lesbian persons are and have been members of the church in good standing, and their membership is seldom questioned. The ordained ministries, however, seem, at least to some persons, to be a special case. Since the clergy fill places of public spiritual leadership in the community of faith, conduct that would be permissible for lay Christians might well be restricted or forbidden in the case of clergy.

This essay will argue that baptism and ordination -- both of them necessary to the being and functioning of the church -- are related to one another. The way in which persons are regarded in baptism should not be abridged by the way they are regarded when it comes to ordination.

In practice, however, the church has treated these two sacramental actions differently. A few years ago the retired Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, noted the discrepancy, calling the church's position an "unsatisfactory compromise." "Officially," he said, "the line is that nobody [of same-sex orientation] can be ordained who engages in genital sexual activity, and yet you can be a member of the church if you do so. Stated this crudely, this is ridiculous." [*Episcopal Life*, June, 1986, p. 4] Churches regularly discuss and decide whether practicing homosexuals may enter the ordained ministry while setting to one side the prior and constitutive matter of the recognized place of homosexuals as baptized Christians.

the present situation:

The issue has a deep history; the church has had persons of same-sex preference in its midst perennially; indeed, it has been ordaining gays for centuries, only requiring that they be celibate. The present critical issue, however, has developed in just a few years. The story, for present purposes, may begin in the mid-'90's when the Rt. Rev. Walter Righter, retired Bishop of Iowa, acting for the Bishop of Newark, ordained a practicing homosexual man as priest. Presentment was brought against him under church law by a group of other bishops on charges of "heresy." (Several other bishops had done what Bishop Righter did, and the threat of the canonical action against him was of consequence beyond the Diocese of Newark.) When the Righter case came to an ecclesiastical trial, the court (which by canon law consisted of bishops) found that the Episcopal Church's

formularies (the Bible, the Creeds, *The Book of Common Prayer*, and *The Constitution and Canons*) contain no regulation on the matter -- nothing that prohibits such ordination, or that specifically allows it, or that makes a special case of persons of homosexual orientation and practice.

Since that landmark decision, the question has continued to stir. Openly gay persons, both women and men, have been ordained as deacons and priests in several dioceses, but not in all. In the Church of England, a gay priest was nominated to be a bishop. Even though his name was withdrawn, the act brought the issue of homosexual clergy to attention throughout the Church of England and the Anglican Communion.

More recently the Diocese of New Hampshire elected as its bishop a known and trusted priest, the Rev. Gene Robinson, who is an acknowledged homosexual living in a long-term relationship with a male partner. At the meeting of the General Convention in Minneapolis in August, 2003, with some controversy and heart-searching, the consents of the House of Deputies and of the House of Bishops were secured, and New Hampshire will have as its bishop a man of openly homosexual orientation and practice. The story was widely reported, taking a front page spot in several large newspapers.

This act of full ecclesiastical recognition for a person of homosexual orientation stirred vigorous opposition. The Convention's approval of the episcopal election in New Hampshire led to anger, disappointment, and a sense of loss and betrayal on the part of many persons, clergy and lay, throughout the church. A few deputies abandoned their credentials and left the Convention. There were other gestures of protest and many private moments of despair. Opposition to the acceptance into the ordained ministry of openly gay persons is strong, principled, articulate, and increasingly organized. Schism or some sort of restructuring seems possible in a badly divided Episcopal Church.

The conflict and the polarization are being felt, not just in the Episcopal Church, but throughout worldwide Anglicanism. No group is completely uniform in its opinions, but deep distrust has grown between the more liberal Anglican provinces, generally in Britain and North America, and the more conservative provinces, generally in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The histories and experience of Christians in these regions are different -- perhaps especially in Africa where a Christian ethic of marriage has differentiated Christians from the society around them. The different communities bring to the Bible different histories and experience. Understandably, they interpret the Scriptures in different ways. Convictions are so deep that many persons on either side of the issue have difficulty crediting the good will and the Christian integrity of those on the other. At least for the moment, opposition to homosexuals in the church and in the ministry seems to some persons to be more important than the common faith and history which have united them in the Anglican obedience. Some Episcopalians feel more kinship in faith with some Third World provinces and bishops than they do with the structures and common life of the American Episcopal Church or with the bishop of their own jurisdiction. To their minds, the church they have known, served, and loved has broken with "core doctrine" and gone into schism. In loyalty to faith and order as they have been known, these

disaffected parties must stand against a church which has fatally compromised with a broad but mistaken trend in modern culture. The unity of Anglicanism seems threatened as it seldom has before.

The news media are good at spotting and reporting conflicts among Christians. As the story continues to develop, it seems certain to stay in the attention of the church and the public.

The issue touches deep matters of personal and collective identity, of what is taken to be the will of God, of how the ordained ministry is understood, of how the Bible is interpreted for the 21st century, and of how past understandings and practices are regarded. Many persons find the proposal that active gays might be ordained to be unthinkable -- often, in fact, simply repugnant. By contrast, persons who argue or act in support of ordaining practicing gays think that the present undercurrent of changing social attitudes and ideas on homosexuality represents a creative stir of God in history, righting old injustices and bringing into full humanity persons who have long been held in second-class status by a hostile society and church.

When a new issue emerges (or when an old issue appears in new guise) the church demonstrates its Christian integrity by the honesty with which, under challenge, it returns to its basic authorities of Scripture and tradition. The faith community, approaching old sources with new questions, may come to see familiar biblical passages in new ways and discover that the church's long historical experience contains overlooked variety.

The present-day question can be stated quite specifically: Can the church permit persons who are of same-sex orientation and who are not celibate to be open about their sexuality as they prepare for, enter, and serve in holy orders? Clearly, a pattern of sexual promiscuity in a homosexual persons would cast a veto on ordination -- as such conduct would in a heterosexual person. But what of stable, mature persons of the same sex who maintain a faithful, exclusive, caring relation with one another over a period of years? Are they fulfilling the moral mandates of love, forgiveness and fidelity that the New Testament requires in intimate human relationships? Can they provide the "wholesome example" in accordance with the teaching of Christ that the ordination rites of the Prayer Book require of the clergy (BCP, p.532,544)?

Can the community of faith, in response to unprecedented challenge, reconsider past attitudes, understandings and practices with respect to sexuality while yet remaining in continuity with itself and holding faithful to the authorities which guide it in spiritual and moral matters? Can this new claim on the part of persons of same-sex orientation be recognized to be "of God?" Or has divine authority as interpreted by the past given the church, indeed, the race, an immutable norm negating such claims? Can obedience to God legitimately take the form of covenanted relationships (which are "in intention life-long") between persons of the same sex? Or are such human relationships and their quest for recognition a manifestation of deceptive modern-day moral confusion?

the connection, baptism and ordination:

An examination of the question may begin with something broad, but pertinent: No Christian has a *right to be ordained*; but any baptized Christian ought to be open to the mysterious inner call of the Spirit and to the scrutiny and approval of the church; each Christian has or ought to have *a right to consider ordination and to be considered by the church for ordination*. The set-apart ministries are in the church, from the church, and for and to the church. While any of the ordained ministries is an individual vocation, each such ministry draws to a personal focus purposes which are the purposes of the church collectively, as the community shares in the fundamental ministry which is that of Jesus Christ. Any Christian's entry into one of the ordained ministries depends on the perceived call of God, the testing of that call, inquiry into one's gifts and limitations, and finally the consent of the community and the authorization and the sacramental setting-apart by a bishop. The ordained ministries are signs of the mysterious stir of the Spirit in the church. By such crude instruments of discernment as we have, we seek, in response to the initiative of the Spirit, to shape a ministry that may provide leadership for the redemptive mission committed to the whole people of God.

If ordination shapes the ministry, baptism shapes the community of redemption. Baptism sets persons within a great divine act of acceptance where each can be an *alter Christus* to each, where persons are open to the gifts, judgment, and service of one another. The implications of baptism go beyond the conferral of church membership. This sacramental sign makes a statement about one's humanity, declaring one's relation to the Christ in and for whom one is created. However one may be regarded by the standards of society, baptism is an affirmation of worth and dignity. It grants the freedom of the city of God. It sets one within the great ministry of the *laos* -- the people chosen to show forth the wonderful works of God (1Pet.2:9-10). Baptism creates, so to speak, the pool of persons who, as sharers in the divine-human life in Christ, stand open to the call of the Spirit. They may be considered and may consider themselves for preparation for and entry into the ordained ministries.

These two actions, ordination and baptism, are required for the identity, continuity and mission of the church. Inevitably they are linked. What the church says about redeemed humanity in baptism should be borne out, not abridged, by what it says in ordination.

The point was sometimes made when the ordination of women was being considered -- it was so catchy that it occasionally appeared as a bumper-sticker. "If the church will not ordain women, it should stop baptizing women." This simple-yet-serious argument arises out of the character and structure of the church. It can be carried over into the consideration of persons of gay or lesbian sexual orientation:

- To ask the question negatively: If homosexual orientation, openly expressed, represents a flaw in one's humanity so basic as to prevent one from being considered for ordination, should it not also prevent one from being baptized? Or if one is already baptized, should not the condition, once it is acknowledged, forbid one from

exercising the rights of the baptized as a communicant, including eligibility for ordination?

- But the question may be put positively: If same-sex orientation, openly expressed, does not stand in the way of one's being baptized, and if it does not automatically exclude one from the Holy Communion, should the fact that gay or lesbian persons are baptized and communicating Christians not open them to eligibility for the ordained ministries, subject to the same scrutiny and the same reception that other baptized persons in good standing might expect?

Ordination is not isolated. Prohibitions and enablings with respect to it have general implications in the life of the redemptive community, as membership in the redemptive community, whose sign is baptism, has implications for ordination.

consulting the Holy Scriptures:

Responsible consideration of the relation of sexuality and ministry, like other moral and spiritual questions, requires a renewed look at the church's unique authoritative source, the Scriptures. Perhaps, as the generous old Puritan, John Robinson, once said, "God hath yet much light to break forth from out his Holy Word."

The appeal to Scripture is made almost reflexively by those who oppose the ordination of gays and lesbians. In the current discussion one has heard repeatedly such remarks as, "It is against the clear teaching of the Bible." "The church is tolerating something that the Word of God does not tolerate." Much current argument at a popular level seems to begin and end with "the Bible says." A recent letter to the Philadelphia *Inquirer*, opposing an effort to give recognition to same-sex domestic partners, said: "The Bible is absolutely and unambiguously clear in its teachings on homosexuality. It is a sin in the eyes of God.... The word of God is eternal, and not subject to interpretation filtered through the political circumstances of the day." Admittedly this is only a letter to a newspaper and not a measured, informed opinion; but it indicates how summarily and shrilly appeal is made to the Bible. Such thinking has voices among church leaders. Archbishop Benjamin Nzimbi of Kenya, in union with his clergy, called the selection of Bishop-elect Robinson "contrary to the clear teachings of the Scripture." [*NYTimes*, August 9, 2003, p.A7] The Rev. David Roseberry, of Christ Church, Plano, Texas, said in a sermon, "In two days, in two votes by less than 600 people, 4,000 years of biblical teaching was overturned." [*NYTimes,* August 11, 2003, p. A10]

Such remarks, made without qualification or nuance, especially when they come from persons of the church, have the sound of certainty and finality. Who would challenge the clear word of the Bible? Or the pronouncements of eminent clergy? Such argument is easily repeated by news reporters and even by politicians. Such judgments are seldom questioned. As a result, persons who know little else about the Bible know that it comes down emphatically against homosexuality.

Of course, if the biblical literature spoke clearly and consistently against homosexuality, that would probably end the discussion of the matter among Christians before it began. However, discussion continues; varied viewpoints are defended; official decisions continue to be made in support of gays. Clearly Christians, all of whom honor the Bible, disagree on the subject of same-sex relations. And beneath that dispute is disagreement about the Bible. In other words, the opponents of the ordination of homosexuals are appealing *not to the Bible pure and simple, but to their interpretation of the Bible.*

We have no Bible without interpretation. The church might be described as a community constantly engaged in inquiry into the meaning of the Bible. Anglicans are on the one hand committed to the authority of the Holy Scriptures (*Lambeth Quadrilateral*, BCP. p.876ff), but at the same time they are committed against the absolutizing of any person's, party's, or church's interpretation of the Scriptures. The Bible must be interpreted, but no interpretation belongs on the same level of authority as the Scriptures themselves. No group in the name of Anglican loyalty should think itself justified in splitting the church *over an interpretation of the Scriptures*. No interpretation is privileged; none, when it is spoken, can silence further discussion; it must hold its own in the discourse of the church alongside other interpretations.

In considering the Scriptures, perhaps the first thing to observe is how little the Bible says on homosexuality. In the hundreds of pages in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, many of them voicing urgent moral counsel, no more than a few sentences speak directly about sexual relations between persons of the same sex. Homosexuality was evidently of no interest to the Jewish prophets, and the few references to it in the New Testament speak of the pagan world, not of regulation within the community of Christian believers. In the formative periods of the biblical literature, this issue seems not to have been close to the heart of either Jewish or Christian collective self-definition or internal discipline.

Yet it is popularly understood (both inside and outside of the church) that the Bible says unambiguously that homosexual conduct is sinful, that it is a danger to society and stands under the judgment of God. One would expect to find the Bible fairly bristling with denunciations of same-sex love. However, the biblical passages that might be taken to speak to the matter are very few. These passages and the argument over them is fairly well-trodden ground, but it is still new material to many devout and somewhat confused churchgoers. Another traversal may be useful:

We may begin with (a) *The incident of Sodom and Gomorrah* (Gen.19:1-28) which, after all the generations of sophisticated biblical study, is still widely taken as a principal piece of evidence that the Bible regards homosexuality as sinful. It has been cited to this effect for centuries, as the English word "sodomy" witnesses. However, one must be cautious in taking material from these patriarchal stories as regulative for human conduct or even for one's understanding of God. (Abraham treats both Sarah and Hagar cruelly, but his conduct passes without censure in the Genesis narrative.) The barbarous and violent incident of Sodom and Gomorrah as told in Genesis seems to combine a

remembered story, an overlay of legend, and an effort to account for a salt formation and for two ruined cities in the region of the Dead Sea.

According to the story, Lot, Abraham's nephew, who was a stranger himself in the city of Sodom, gave lodging to three unknown persons (three "angels," as the story has it). His act offended the men of Sodom, who clamored to have the guests delivered to them so that they might know them (vs. 5). Lot in desperation offered these men his daughters to turn aside their anger (vs. 8). (This is the most despicable act in the story -- an act whose consequences are headed off by the three strangers and for which Lot is not rebuked in the account.) When Lot and his family had fled the city, it was destroyed completely in a terrible act of divine judgment (vss. 24-29). Part of the moral problem of the story is that God visits this indiscriminate destruction on all the people of two cities because of the brutal intentions of some of the men of one of the cities. Jesus expressly rejects the idea that providence works in this way. He observed that rain and sun fall as generously on the fields of bad farmers as of good (Mtt. 5:35), and unstable stone towers fall on persons regardless of their moral character (Lk. 13:4). The gospel of a crucified Messiah should make it clear that good and bad events are not retributive. Modern-day Christians seeking guidance should only appeal to this Genesis story with much hesitation.

The Sodom and Gomorrah incident figures largely in the popular understanding that the Bible is anti-gay. Yet the narrative makes no clear mention of homosexual conduct. That meaning has been read into the story. The word "know" that is used in vs. 5 where the men of Sodom want to "know" Lot's male guests can carry a sexual meaning (as it clearly does in vs. 8 which speaks of young women who have not known a man), but that is not the only or even the usual meaning of the word. If a sexual meaning is intended, as some biblical interpreters hold, the story is told so as to emphasize the threat of gang rape and the intervention of the "angels" to frustrate the violence (vss. 9b-11).

Many scholars, however, think that any reference to homosexuality is imposed on the story and that the city was judged because of its inhospitality to strangers. Lot pleads "Do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof" (19:8b). To turn away or to allow harm to come to a stranger was a grievous offense in the ancient Near East. This ungenerous conduct may have grown from general moral disorder in the two cities. The later biblical references to Sodom and Gomorrah speak of their injustice, pride, or unspecified sins, but say nothing of homosexuality; see Deut. 29:16-28; Isa. 1:10; 3:9; Jer. 23:14; Ezek. 16:49; Amos 4:11; Rom. 9:29, quoting Isa.1:9; 2 Pet. 2:6; Jude 7. When Jesus mentions the incident in Lk. 10:10-12 (parallel in Matt. 10:14-15), it is in connection with persons who turn away those who come to them in peace.

In an extended passage in his pioneering study *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*, 1955, the Church of England scholar D.S. Bailey sought to locate the source of "the 'homosexual' interpretation of the sin of Sodom" -- an interpretation which is not present in the story itself, but which fastened itself firmly on Jewish and Christian readings of it from early in the Christian era. He finds that some late Apocryphal writings first introduced the idea that the sin of Sodom was sexual in nature and then the further

idea that it involved homosexuality. This interpretation eventually carried the authority of Philo. Bailey judges that this interpretation arose as a way in which Jews could criticize the exploitive sexual life of Hellenistic culture. In time this interpretation was accepted in some early and influential Christian writings -- and eventually taken to be an element in the biblical story itself.

There is complexity and mystery in this biblical account, as there is in all of the mythic material in early Genesis. The incident must be read in a discriminating way. It belongs to the saga of Abraham as the bearer of the divine covenant; it was not written and preserved to guide modern readers in determining the place of gays in 21st century church and society.

(The story in Judges 19 of the crime of Gibeah contains some of the same characteristics, and some critics judge that features of it are derived from the Sodom and Gomorrah story. It is a brutal account of gang rape. It is sometimes cited when biblical material that might bear on homosexuality is gathered -- alas, sometimes cited in such a way as to imply that there is some intrinsic connection between homosexual orientation and cruelty or perversion.)

(b) *The "Holiness Code,"* is a body of law (Lev. 18-26) setting forth rules of purity distinguishing the people of the covenant from the people of Egypt or the nations. Lev. 18:3 does refer to male homosexual acts: "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death" (See also Lev. 18:22; 20:13).

Although this rule appears in an important body of legislation, no reference is made to it in the later Jewish Scriptures; there is no recorded case of its application; and no supplemental laws or commentary are associated with it in the canonical texts, Jewish or Christian. Yet it is unmistakably a part of the Jewish law, and one must ask about the purpose of this Levitical rule and to what extent twenty-first century Christians should regard themselves bound by it. (One may note that this law refers only to men.)

It is not helpful to stress the word "abomination" -- a seldom-used word which suggests aesthetic disgust or moral revulsion. In Leviticus the term refers to conduct that violates a ritual taboo and which might or might not have a link with morality. Leviticus 11:13-19 gives a quite arbitrary list of birds which it is "an abomination" to eat. In Leviticus 19, alongside counsel to revere one's parents and to be honest and truthful (vss.19:3,11f), there is a law saying that to eat meat that has been offered as a sacrifice on the third day rather than on the day it is offered is "an abomination" (vs.7). It would be a very wooden use of biblical authority to claim that because something was taken to be "an abomination" in the Levitical sense in ancient Israel, it must necessarily be thought to be "an abomination" in some modern sense today.

The ancient Jewish laws set moral and ritual matters side by side. Enduring principles of covenant community -- such as not defrauding one's neighbor or commending that one

leave something in one's field to be gleaned by the poor (Lev.19:13,9) -- stand alongside trivial matters that are locked in their own time -- such as not sowing one's field with two kinds of seed or not wearing a garment made of two kinds of material (Lev. 19:19). Over the centuries, Christians who had Leviticus in their Bible and sought to find it relevant have often made a distinction, arguing that the moral parts of the biblical laws are permanent, while the ceremonial parts are transient and no longer applicable. (This distinction is put forward in Article VII, "Of the Old Testament," in the Church of England's *Articles of Religion*.) However, in the mind of ancient Israel, the law was one and indivisible. These laws all served to shape a holy people whose life reflected the holiness of God (Lev. 19:2).

Part of the rationale for holiness in Jewish law was "keeping distinct the categories of creation. It therefore involves correct definition, discrimination and order." (Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 1970, p.67) Both the rules forbidding sexual relations between men and men and the dietary rules distinguishing clean and unclean food had this intent. Jews must observe the due order of things, even though it is not always clear to a modern reader on what basis this order was determined. The world-view to which these laws gave expression is remote and has no immediate relevance for modern Christians. Even though present-day Christians remain a people of the Bible, we cannot determine sexual practice for ourselves simply by quoting the laws of ancient Israel. Rather, we must examine human sexuality as we see it, and in the light of knowledge and experience, we are free to question the authority for us of Levitical sexual rules and the understandings on which they were based just as we question the Levitical rules about what it is permissible to eat or to wear. Having the Bible in our hands does not deliver us from the necessity of thinking for ourselves.

We may add what is an admittedly *ad hominem* observation: Persons who cite the law codes of ancient Judaism in determining moral standards for today's world inevitably cite them selectively and with qualifications. They want to follow and yet not follow such laws. They do not seek the death penalty for a homosexual act, even though it was clearly required by the Levitical code (for both parties, one may note). Moreover, they do not seek to bind the modern-day church and society to other laws which have equivalent biblical authority. Deuteronomy 21:18-21, for example, requires that a stubborn and rebellious son (daughters are not mentioned) shall be denounced by his parents before the elders of the community and stoned.

Laws of the ancient Jewish codes seem to be cited in modern debates when they are convenient and ignored when they are not. All legislation is written relative to a situation; today's society and today's knowledge of human sexuality are not those of ancient Israel; one cannot simply cite this ancient legislation as what "the Word of God" says for the church today. If this piece of law is to be followed now it will be because there are reasons for following it, rather than because it appears in the text of Leviticus. If it is to be disregarded, it will be because the assumptions it embodied or the purposes it served are no longer pertinent. Present-day Christians (indeed, present-day Jews), when they consider

the ancient laws of Israel, inevitably select, interpret, exercise a measure of detachment, and use their God-given judgment.

It is likely that twenty-first century Christians who urge the authority of this Levitical material do so because it seems to support conclusions to which they have come on other more specifically Christian grounds.

(c) We turn therefore to *our central Christian sources*, noting first of all that in *the Gospels*, Jesus, who says much about the poor and about forgiveness, about the danger of riches, or of self-righteousness, has nothing whatever to say about homosexuality. The observation at least suggests something about priorities and proportion.

Most other strata of the literature of the apostolic generation (Acts, the Johannine writings, Hebrews, the Petrine epistles, the Apocalypse) are also silent on the subject.

(d) However, *three texts from the Pauline literature* figure in any consideration of the subject. The passages suggest that Christians, as a new, marginal social group, had to differentiate themselves from the general society by drawing up an indictment of the ideals and practices with which they were surrounded. 1Corinthians 6:9 and 1Timothy 1:10 contain lists of social vices of the Roman world which include homosexual conduct between men: "sodomites (Gr. *arsenokoitais*), slave traders, liars, perjurers." In one additional, fuller reference, Romans 1:26-27, Paul cites homosexual acts (this time using terms that include women as well as men) as perversions of the creator's intention, "Women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another."

Three things may be noted about this Pauline -- or in the case of 1Timothy, this very likely Deutero-Pauline -- material:

(1) The NT writers are not discussing "sexual orientation" -- a category that comes from modern psychology and the way it has taught us to look at human life. Indeed, there is no word in the Bible that is an equivalent of "homosexuality." (The Oxford English Dictionary indicates that "homosexual" and related terms only appear as words in the English language shortly before 1900.) Paul, like the levitical legislation, speaks of conduct, not of a psychological orientation or preference.

(2) All three passages are speaking of the vices of pagan society -- the idolatrous, sin-structured "world" from which believers in Jesus (along with Jews) had turned away. As new converts are likely to do, the early Christians strengthened their case for themselves by painting the pagan world as a "mass of perdition." These passages in the New Testament are not presenting a dispassionate assessment of the moral life of the Empire, nor giving internal pastoral regulation for the Christian community, but depicting what the pagan world was and "what some of you used to be" (1Cor. 6:11).

(3) In the Hellenistic world, the commonest social form of homosexual behavior was sexual acts between an adult male and a boy or youth. Grown men (often they were married men) would develop strong erotic attachments to (virtually "crushes" on) adolescent boys. These unequal and exploitive relationships were condemned by some Roman moralists. Christians understandably saw such a social pattern as a sinful distortion of the purpose of the Creator. One cannot show that pederasty was the only form of same-sex conduct that Paul could have had in mind in the passages cited, but it would have been the principal form. His terms in 1Corinthians 6:9, *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* (which are variously translated -- the NRSV has "male prostitutes and sodomites"), apparently refer to the passive call-boy and the aggressive older male in these sexual arrangements.

When the New Testament authors condemned such exploitive behavior, they were identifying traits of a world gone wrong. The conduct they denounced (*viz.*, pederasty) would have to be repented of and abandoned by anyone who practiced it and who sought to be a Christian.

Some *2nd and 3rd century sources* show the Christian church expressly relating sexual conduct to baptismal discipline. The anonymous early 2nd century writing, the *Didache* 2.2, in some moral instruction that seems to have been given before baptism, said "do not corrupt boys" [C. Richardson trans.], but the words only appear in a list of prohibitions, and the point is not developed. Somewhat later, Hippolytus of Rome, in his *Apostolic Tradition*, c.215 CE, citing occupations or ways of life that had to be abandoned before one could be enrolled as a catechumen (i.e. a Christian-in-training), specifies a man who is a "pederast" (*Ap.Trad.*, 16:25). (This is the English translation in Lucien Deiss; other English translators give "profligate" [G.J. Cuming], or "sodomite" [Dix/Chadwick].) This regulation shows that homosexual practice in its common form would have kept one from admission to the catechumenate and would have excluded one from baptism. Hippolytus was speaking about a chosen course of conduct which could and must be left: "Let them desist or be rejected."

In reading such early Christian material, as in reading the New Testament, one must remind oneself that the authors were not talking about "sexual orientation," but about the use of boys for the sexual gratification of men -- conduct which, although it was widespread in Greco-Roman society, was totally unacceptable for Christians.

This biblical and early Christian material is not directly pertinent to the modern discussion, for it condemns conduct that all persons who care about the integrity of the self and about wholeness and mutuality in human relations would similarly condemn today. The ancient texts know nothing about "sexual orientation," the thing that is at the heart of today's controversies. When moral persons today talk about what these early sources talk about, viz. pederasty, they concur in the biblical and early Christian condemnation of it -- indeed, such conduct is punishable by law in today's society. But with regard to the human phenomenon whose legitimacy is at issue in today's church -- *viz.* mature, faithful, mutual, covenanted relations between adults of the same sex, some of whom may be baptized Christians -- the New Testament and the early church are silent.

It is a rule of biblical interpretation that everything is said with reference to a situation. In a changed situation to say the same thing that was said in a past situation may not be to say the same thing at all, but to say a quite different thing. Equivalency or non-equivalency of contexts must be factored into any appeal to biblical authority. At the end of his study, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, 1983, the New Testament exegete Robin Scroggs concludes:

> The basic model in today's Christian homosexual community is so different from the model attacked by the New Testament that the criterion of reasonable similarity of context is not met. The conclusion I have to draw seems inevitable: *Biblical judgments against homosexuality are not relevant to today's debate*. They should no longer be used in denominational discussions about homosexuality, should in no way be a weapon to justify refusal of ordination, *not because the Bible is not authoritative*, but simply because it does not address the issues involved. [p.127, emphasis is the author's]

One who wants to take the Bible seriously cannot simply quote texts. The enduring moral and religious insights of the scriptures are always expressed in terms of the culture of the time and place in which they were spoken and written. The historical, culture-specific character of the Bible requires that persons in every generation who seek to consent to its faith and moral counsel must use their minds and interpret. The pertinence of this ancient literature for our own situation must be established through dialogue between (1) what we understand it to have been saying in its original context and (2) the best that we can discover about ourselves and our world today.

Intending to return to the Scriptures later, we now move from the biblical past to a consideration of features of present-day experience.

some modern understandings:

Although homosexuality has been studied extensively, it is still not fully understood. There is a basic uncertainty as to how prevalent it is in American society. Kinsey's pioneering survey indicated that 10% of the population is dominantly homosexual. This figure had been used for many years, but a more recent survey (itself now a few years old) gives the figure of 2%. Very possibly 10% is too high for American society as a whole, but since persons of open homosexual practice tend to gather in certain locations, notably in cities, the figure of 2% may seem too low to match one's unscientific observations in some centers. Moreover, statistics cannot easily take account of the homosexual experimentation that may be a temporary part of the experience of persons who later develop a generally heterosexual orientation.

But setting aside the uncertain statistics, which do not affect the moral issue, we must ask a central question:

- Is homosexual conduct an unnatural mode of behavior, which is chosen by some persons (perhaps under the influence of others), and which can be stopped at will?

- Or does such conduct express a deeply-set personal orientation which one discovers in oneself, which is not felt to be unnatural unless one is persuaded of its unnaturalness by others, which is no more tied to a single "life style" than heterosexuality is, and which cannot be denied in oneself without some damaging self-repudiation?

To use analogies:

- Is homosexual conduct like habits or interests, such as jogging or a passion for hi-fi recordings, which may be good or bad, and that a mature person can either take up or drop according to what seems necessary or desirable?

- Or is it like being left-handed or having red hair -- conditions which put one in a minority (a minority which at times is made to feel self-conscious and perhaps put down), but conditions which so belong to the way one is that they cannot be changed, or at least not changed without effort, and sometimes pain and personal diminishment?

For the most part, American society has answered this question by the first of these options. The homosexual portion of the population (whether 10% or 2% or somewhere in between) is thought to have made itself as it is. It must be "cured," or helped to change, or else forced to survive by concealing something important about itself. It cannot just be let alone; it must be condemned -- indeed, it may be ostracized, discriminated against or actually persecuted if it seeks to be open.

Sexuality lies deep in the human psyche where it is a center of individual and collective identity, but where it is also a center of insecurity and threatenability from which one can project a deep fear of or hatred towards those who by being different challenge the normativity of one's own conduct and assumptions. The dominant heterosexual portion of American society can stigmatize, with a sense of its own righteousness, persons who openly follow an alternative to its ways.

Although the final verdict may not be in, much modern study supports an understanding of sexuality in general along the lines of the second alternative proposed above. Same-sex (or, for that matter, other-sex) preference seems to be a fundamental orientation of the personality, an orientation which may have a genetic basis. In a predominately heterosexual population there may be struggle and bewilderment as any person comes to recognize himself or herself as gay or lesbian, a recognition which may occur any time between adolescence and adulthood. The process of self-discovery may be marked by explorations, false leads, anxiety and misunderstandings. However, the condition, when it is identified, is in itself neither good nor bad, desirable nor undesirable, but simply the way some people are.

It has also come to be recognized that people do not fall neatly into two categories: heterosexual and homosexual. Rather, human sexuality is quite varied and runs on a continuum which is not the same from one person to another, from one culture to another, nor from one group to another within the same culture. Clearly, maleness and femaleness are rooted in physiology, but we have no direct access to our own bodies uninterpreted by our self-images and by our culture. As psychological and social forces that identify us, move us, unite us and divide us, maleness and femaleness are in great measure socially constructed and hence neither constant nor universal. This consideration complicates the issue that is before the church and the society, but unless it is factored in, discussion is superficial and tends to cast sexual conduct into absolute and usually judgmental, either-or categories.

the Pauline vision:

To return to our central Christian sources, although St. Paul's catalogs of pagan vices are not directly pertinent to the point in hand, his writings are deeply relevant through their presentation of the gospel, the church and baptism.

In an important passage, Paul celebrates a God-given oneness in Christ. Barriers between groups are broken down and a new unity is accomplished by a transformation in Christ which is grasped by faith, signified by baptism, and demonstrated in the community of redemption (Gal. 2:26-28). In this new order in Christ, Paul says:

> *There is no longer Jew nor Greek,*
> *there is no longer slave or free,*
> *there is no longer male and female;*
> *for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.* (vs.28)

In describing the redeemed, reordered humanity which springs into being in Christ and overcomes deep religious, social and gender disunities, Paul draws on what is sometimes called the "baptismal reunification formula" (which he cites, but less fully elsewhere, see 1Cor. 12:13; Col. 3:11). The rhythm of the words suggests that they may have had a liturgical or catechetical origin; the old life was divided, but Christians celebrate the new life, listing the stubborn, seemingly ineradicable divisions which are triumphantly overcome "in Christ Jesus."

The social divisions which are identified in Galatians 2:28 were not made by choices, but by conditions given in the terms of one's existence. In the new life in Christ and the church, Jews and Greeks retained their ethnic heritage; slaves continued to be slaves and free citizens free citizens; and persons necessarily remained distinguished as male and female. Persons in these categories could not by an act of will make themselves other than they were. Yet, in the new humanity that was entered through baptism -- the new humanity which is the sign of the redemption open to all -- these dividing conditions no longer stand in the way of the oneness that is declared in Christ and bodied forth in the church. In the new people of God, neither superiority nor diminishment attaches to one's

being part of the former collective identities. Rather than oppressing, using, demeaning or limiting one another, believers are bound together in mutual listening, needing, truth-telling, forgiving, honoring, loving and giving. As members of Christ and of one another, each is open to the gifts, help and judgment of any.

Although Paul in Galatians 2:28 mentioned the perceived divisions of his own society and did not speak of such present-day divisions as race, national origin, class, ideology or sexual orientation, his point is clearly as applicable to any contemporary situation as it was those of his time. Paul probably regarded the division between Jew and non-Jew as the most basic and, on natural grounds, the most unbridgeable chasm in the human community. If Christ could bring Jews and Greeks together in a new life, there was no limit to the unifying power of the Christian message.

Paul would no doubt have thought of redemption and the reordering of human relations in Christ as affirming the intention of God in the primal creation -- restoring a unity shattered by sin. Paul's *there is no longer male nor female* seems to echo the creation story in which male and female complementarily constitute the image of God (Gen.1:27f). From the Scriptures and from social developments, a Christian doctrine of marriage has grown which comes to expression in liturgical rites and in the theological, pastoral and ethical tradition, and which has been validated by generations of testing and experience. This doctrine holds that marriage between a man and a woman is God-given and good, that it is an equal and mutual relationship, entered for a husband and wife's joy in one another, for support in good circumstances and bad, and (when it is God's will) for the generation and upbringing of children, and that it is "in intention life-long" and is to be maintained in love and faithfulness.

However, to say that heterosexual marriage is good and is part of the divine order for society and should be sustained in marital faithfulness says nothing in itself about any other form of intimate, covenanted human relations. It does not in itself, for example, say anything for or against celibacy or singleness as godly vocations. The familiar ideal of marriage is at least in part a human construction which has developed relative to the culture of the West; and while it should be upheld, it is not fragile, and it should not be absolutized. We tend to be right about what we see and experience as good and less right about what we do not see or experience. The Bible says nothing either supporting or opposing persons of the same sex living in loving relation with one another. It is as silent on this situation as it is on any other issue, however urgent for us, which had not arisen in the world and culture of its own times and places.

We live in our situation, in which we continue to read the Bible -- not as a rule book, which clearly it is not, but as providing a structure of reality (perhaps it is more of a presiding myth) in which we can live productively, seeking to find and follow the will of God. One who affirms that heterosexual marriage is a way in which the common Christian sources can rightly be followed and the divine intention for humanity be expressed does not need not go on to say that no other form of intimate relations can be personally fulfilling, socially constructive, or in accord with the intention of the Creator.

If same-sex preference is not a chosen pattern of conduct, but a condition that belongs to the very humanity of a significant portion of the race, it is a part of the creation, and is good. It is not something that needs to be repented of and put aside, but -- like being Jewish or Greek, male or female -- it can be brought into the new community of grace, which is the token of humanity renewed, set free, and made one. Demonstrably, it is possible for persons to live their homosexual orientation morally, responsibly and fulfillingly. In the acceptance and moral order of the church, even if not in the society outside it, one's God-given dignity can be recognized and one's humanity can be celebrated. Homosexuality in itself need not be a barrier to baptism and should not stand in the way of the exercise of the full rights of the baptized, including eligibility for ordination.

some ecclesiological and pastoral notes:

As a matter of realism it might be observed that in churches which practice infant baptism, presumably a portion (10%?, 2%?) of the children who are baptized will in the course of their physical, social and psychic development come to recognize themselves as homosexual. That recognition and its open acknowledgment should in itself be no barrier to continued life within the community of faith and eucharist or to the eligibility for public, set-apart ministry that follows from baptism. The discovery of same-sex orientation within oneself does not disannul or partially disannul one's baptism and its privileges. (At baptism, the church does not say, "We receive you into the household of God, unless... and until....") The church needs to ask how morally one's sexuality is being lived. Same-sex orientation itself need not be repudiated in the course of the self's lifelong discovery of itself. It is not bad; it simply is.

We may observe that in the Episcopal Church persons who are ordained or who are being considered for ordination are not, with respect to their sexual conduct, put in a special category. If other churches at other times have sought to hold clergy to different and more restrictive patterns of sexual behavior than were expected of the laity, Anglicanism has, generally speaking, observed no such distinctions. The norms for the sexual conduct of clergy -- that is, clergy who are not living under a voluntarily assumed rule -- are those for the sexual conduct of Christians in general. No less and no more is expected of bishops, priests and deacons than is expected of any baptized Christian.

No one could expect that actions opening the ordained clergy to persons in same-sex relationships would not produce unforeseen problems, but there have been chronic problems with past policies that have forced gays either to conceal their sexual preference or to enter a life of celibacy for which they may have no real vocation. And of course, the church's experience of ordaining heterosexuals has been marked by grievous personal failings and pastoral casualties. If the church is going to ordain human beings, it is going to have problems, specifically sexual problems.

One should not argue that if homosexuality does not bar one from membership it should not bar one from holy orders without acknowledging that there are in fact physical, intellectual or emotional conditions that might disqualify a church member in good standing from eligibility for the priesthood. (To be fair to past experience, it should be said that persons with physical disabilities, academic limitations, and impaired emotional life have yet served in the ordained ministries, sometimes making outstanding contributions. Limitations in some areas of life often call forth compensatory abilities. The church is ruled by grace and its surprises, rather than by some dull sense of human normality. God's power is made perfect in weakness, 2Cor. 12:9. Clergy, like other persons who fill responsible positions, can be both gifted and flawed.) The disabilities that would stand in the way of candidacy would ordinarily be those that would prevent one from carrying out the pastoral, sacramental and preaching tasks that are usually done by ordained persons. However, too many persons of same-sex orientation have functioned too well in clerical roles for one to suppose that such sexual preference must in itself stand in the way of ordination.

Obviously, heterosexuality confers no release from responsibility or scrutiny. Some heterosexual persons have been known to act promiscuously or abusively. They have been unable to relate maturely to persons of the opposite sex or to sustain stable intimate relationships. Such patterns of conduct would raise questions about ordination or might restrict one's place of ministry or significantly hinder it or even bring it to an end were one to be ordained. The barriers would not be because persons were heterosexual, but because they were unable to handle their sexuality responsibly. Similarly, questions must be asked about gays and lesbians who seek entry into the ordination process. Are they living their sexuality in ways that help or hurt the common life?

Clearly there are special problems that mature, faithful Christian persons of same-sex orientation face in establishing an adequate, long-term "life style." (There are problems for everyone, but acceptable options for heterosexuals or celibates are more obvious, more easily entered, and more socially supported than are those for non-celibate gays and lesbians.) The church, for its part, should extend pastoral help to all persons who must find their way through the sexual labyrinth of present-day American society. The church must reach out as a community whose members care for one another and defer to one another in love and respect. However, the subtle, interpersonal behaviors by which such a community coheres are governed less by formal regulations than by the general but elusive rule of kindness and pastoral wisdom.

We restate our basic proposition: Baptized Christians in good standing and who are of homosexual orientation should be as eligible as anyone else for the call of God to the set-apart ministries. The way of life of gay and lesbian candidates for ordination should be examined, as should the way of life of any heterosexual candidate. But the openness of the church to the free but regulated exercise of any member's spiritual gifts should be an article in any "bill of rights for the baptized."

The Episcopal Church has by long practice, baptized gays and lesbians and admitted them to the Holy Communion. It is not a matter of sacramental recognition alone; the church has been beneficiary (and very likely all readers of this paper have been beneficiaries, knowingly or unknowingly) of the gifts and ministries of such persons. The church has also decided for ordaining homosexual men or women -- but only as long as they were celibate or concealed their sexual orientation. If baptism and ordination are related, as this essay has contended they are, can the church continue to affirm persons of same-sex orientation through baptism and its attendant rights of membership and not affirm them also when it comes to recognizing the unpredictable inward call of the Spirit to ordination?

[a note: This essay has largely addressed the biblical material that bears on its subject. If it were written on a larger scale and for another purpose it would have had to consider the centuries of thought and experience that have fallen between the biblical writings and today, for tradition is often cited alongside the Bible as weighing against tolerating homosexuality. One hears it confidently affirmed that the long moral tradition of Christianity has spoken with one voice against homosexuality. Anti-gay persons and groups claim to be contending for "the traditional historic Christian faith." One does not want to disregard tradition, but it seems safe to guess that the history of Christian moral judgment against homosexuality has been a history of biblical interpretation, some of it informed and some of it naive or simply perverse. Most of the moral theologians who have spoken out against same-sex relations were convinced that in this matter they were simply following the clear lead of the Word of God.

It is not useful to argue from tradition if tradition largely repeats understandings of the Bible which were introduced early and then passed from generation to generation without reexamination. Both now and in the past, so much of the prevailing Christian attitude on homosexuality traces to what is understood to be biblical condemnation of it that little else will sustain a religiously-based judgment against homosexuality if this biblical evidence is brought under question and found not to stand. In this matter, argument from the Bible is and probably always has been decisive.]

[This essay was written at the Episcopal Divinity School, Cambridge, MA, in 1984 and was given some local circulation. It has been updated in 2003. It has not been published.]

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